

# African Studies

## Spotlight: Ethnicism

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### Xenophobic violence in the 'Rainbow' nation

by [Jean Pierre Misago](#) 1 Mar 2017

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For the fourth consecutive week now, South Africa [is witnessing](#) what many analysts call a "resurgence" of xenophobic violence in parts of Johannesburg and Pretoria, the country's capital city.

The reality is that this type of violence is a daily occurrence in the country, although it does not always get media attention. It has, in fact, become a long-standing feature in post-apartheid South Africa.

Since 1994, tens of thousands of people have been harassed, attacked or killed because of their status as outsiders or foreign nationals ([PDF](#)).

Despite claims to the contrary by the government, violence against foreign nationals in South Africa [did not end](#) in June 2008 when the massive outbreak that started a month earlier subsided.

As the current incidents illustrate, hostility towards foreign nationals is still pervasive in the country and continues



to result in more cases of murder, injuries, threats of mob violence, looting and the destruction of residential property and businesses, as well as mass displacement.

And yes, the violence is xenophobic (and not "just crime", as many in government prefer labelling it) because it is - as the scholar Belinda Dodson

reminds us - "an explicit targeting of foreign nationals or outsiders for violent attacks despite other material, political, cultural or social forces that might be at play". ([PDF](#))

It is a hate crime whose logic goes beyond the often accompanying and misleading criminal opportunism. The real motive of the violence, as unambiguously expressed by the perpetrators themselves, is to drive foreign populations out of communities.

## Xenophobic violence as a symptom of leadership deficit

A quick analytical look reveals that the drivers of ongoing xenophobic violence in South Africa, as well as the lack of effective response and preventive interventions, reflect a dreadful lack of competent, decisive and trusted leadership at all levels of government.

The drivers of xenophobic violence in South Africa are inevitably multiple and embedded in a complex interplay of the country's past and present structural - political, social and economic - factors.

Chief among underlying causal factors is obviously the prevailing anti-immigrant sentiment easily fuelled by political scapegoating. Political leaders and officials of the national, provincial and local government often blame foreign nationals for their systemic failures to deliver on the political promises and satisfy the citizenry's growing expectations ([PDF](#)).

Due to political scapegoating, many South African citizens perceive foreign nationals as a serious threat that needs to be eliminated by any means necessary. This perception is stronger among the majority of citizens living in poor townships and informal settlements where they meet and fiercely compete with equally poor African immigrants for scarce resources and opportunities.



The result is that local residents in these areas have become increasingly convinced that foreign nationals are to blame for all their socioeconomic ills and hardships including poverty, unemployment, poor service delivery, lack of business space and opportunities; crime; prostitution; drug and alcohol abuse; and deadly diseases ([PDF](#)).

By blaming foreign nationals for its failures to deliver on its core functions and responsibilities, the South African government is unfortunately displaying an obvious if sorry sign of weak and incompetent leadership.



The triggers of the violence paint an even more worrying picture of the leadership deficit in the "rainbow" nation. Indeed, the strong anti-immigrant sentiment alone cannot explain the occurrence of violence in some areas and not in others where such negative attitudes are equally strong.

Attitudes are not always a good predictor of behaviour. Rather ample

research evidence indicates that the triggers of the violence are located in the "micropolitics" at play in many of country's towns townships and informal settlements ([PDF](#)).

Instigators and perpetrators of xenophobic violence are well known in their respective communities, but the de facto impunity they enjoy only means that they are likely - as they have in many cases - to strike again.

Violent attacks on foreign nationals are usually triggered by political mobilisation led by local economic and/or political players and informal community leadership groups (in the form of civic organisations, community policing forums, business associations, concerned residents' associations, etc) for their economic and political interests.

This violence is essentially "politics by other means". It has proved a useful tool for these local politicians to consolidate their power and community leadership monopoly needed to expand their client base and the economic revenues it represents.



These "violence entrepreneurs" capitalise on people's sentiments and frustrations and have no difficulty co-opting local residents for participation in the violence given the pervasive negative attitudes. Xenophobic violence is triggered by the mobilisation of the existing collective discontent.

**With denialism and impunity, violence continues**

It is common knowledge that the official South African government's response to xenophobia and related violence has been characterised by "denialism".

Such denialism is rooted in a discourse which labels all xenophobic violence as "just crime and not xenophobia", a categorisation that demands few specific and sustained interventions or policy changes.



Both President Jacob Zuma and Minister of Home Affairs Malusi Gigaba repeated the popular if infamous refrain this week.

Perhaps understandably, admitting the existence of a xenophobic citizenry is both ideologically and politically uncomfortable for the ruling African National Congress, which is now the custodian of the multiracial, multi-ethnic "rainbow" nation and sees itself as the champion of human rights and unity in diversity.

In addition to the lack of effective policy response, the government unwillingness to recognise xenophobia coupled with a general weak judicial system has also led to an alarming culture of impunity and lack of accountability for perpetrators and mandated institutions: foreign nationals have been repeatedly

attacked in South Africa since 1994 but few perpetrators have been charged, even fewer convicted. In some instances, state agents have actively protected those accused of anti-foreigner violence.

Similarly, there have been no efforts to hold mandated institutions such as the police and the intelligence community accountable for their failure to prevent and stop violence despite visible warning signs.

As an example, government promises to set up special courts to enable quick prosecutions after the 2008 and 2015 violence never materialised.

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Unfortunately, the government's unwillingness to acknowledge that this violence is xenophobic and its failure to work on finding appropriate solutions are a sign of ineffective leadership. Without appropriate intervention violence will continue.